

# Jerusalem Council

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“But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (vs 11) Acts 15:1-35

## Intro - My Gospel Testimony

- grew up Christian home, Christian school
  - learned what Christians were supposed to do, what they were not supposed to do
  - learned all the Bible stories - how to learn from these stories what you are supposed to do, what you are not supposed to do
  - headed to a Christian college - learned more about the Bible, more about what I was supposed to do, and what I wasn't supposed to do
- I hated it
  - I hated reading the Bible
  - Imagine spending time with someone - and every time you did they told you what you were doing wrong, and what you needed to be doing better
- My entire relationship with God, and with the Bible was through a lens of - do this, don't do this
  - not a surprise it was frustrating
  - not a surprise that I didn't want to read the Bible
  - not a surprise I resented God and truth
  - it was all about what I must do and not do
- I'd do a good job for a while
  - and I was pretty happy, thought God was happy with me
- Then I'd blow it
  - and I'd be spiritually depressed, knowing God was so bummed with me
  - And I was in this endless cycle of work hard and fail, then try and get back up, and then fail

- then 7 years ago, we as a church went through the book of Galatians
  - and the Lord utterly wrecked me
  - “you think YOU’RE good deeds are enough to make you righteous before me?”
  - “think again. I am so holy, so perfect - you cannot reach me with your good deeds”
  - and I was broken - but in a different way - my eyes weren’t on me, they were on God and his glory and his holiness
    - and I was truly desperate - I cannot pull this thing off
    - and at that moment - the glory of the cross shined through
    - only Jesus is good enough
    - only Jesus is righteous
    - and on the cross - he took my unrighteousness, forgave me my sin, and gave me his righteousness
    - it is all about Jesus, and what he had done for me

*\*then I read in*

- John 5 - the Scriptures are all about Jesus
  - hope on every page - because its about Jesus. The cross. Though I failed - every page - Jesus did not fail, and he took my failure upon himself on the cross
- that is the gospel
  - Paul says it is of first importance in the Christian life
  - and he tells us that we need to be reminded of it - because we forget it
  - the default mode of every human heart is legalism - what must I do to be right with God
  - no - don’t think that way - what must God do to rescue me - that is my only hope

*\*which brings us to Acts chapter 15*

- *the significance of this chapter cannot be overstated*
- *it’s been called the most important event in the church, the most important chapter in the Bible*

## **Context**

- on the heels of a successful missions trip
  - people getting saved
  - but here’s the thing - they weren’t Jews
  - they were Gentiles, they were outsiders

*\*this tension comes to a historic head here in Acts chapter 15*

*\*breaking this chapter up in 3 sections:*

- vs 1-5 the setting
- vs 6-21 the council
- vs 22-35 the response
  - *may be a longer sermon than usual - if we did points - there would probably be close to 20 - so God help us*

## **Verse 1-5 The Setting**

- “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversation of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses”
- here we are introduced to a group of Jewish believers referred to in the New Testament as the **Judaizers**, also referred to as “**the circumcision party**”, and also elsewhere as the **Pharisees**
  - it was this very group that caused Paul to write the entire book of Galatians
    - if you read Galatians - Paul mentions the setting as Acts 15 - Antioch, Peter and the apostles, the circumcision party
- **this group was essentially saying this:**
  - **the gospel is that you are loved by God, and he sent his son to die for your sins. You can be forgiven - if you do these things.**
    - you get that?
    - almost sounds right doesn't it?
    - “you can be saved, if you believe in Jesus, and then do these things”

*\*Paul didn't think so*

- as verse 2 tells us - Paul clearly disagreed with and debated much with them
  - and if you look to Galatians - we see more of the content of these debates

- “A person is not **justified** by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ” Galatians 2:16
  - “All who **rely** on works of the law are under a curse” Galatians 3:10
  - “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteous shall live by faith” Galatians 3:11
  - **Paul is telling them they are getting salvation wrong, the gospel wrong, and even reading the Old Testament all wrong**
- after much debate - the church in Antioch - the same church that sent Paul on his mission trip - wisely decides they need more wisdom on this matter
    - so they now send Paul and Barnabas, along with some of the church there in Antioch - up to Jerusalem - to hear what the other apostles and elders have to say

## **Verse 6-21 The Council**

### ***\*break the council up into two sections***

- *verses 6-11 - Peter speaks. He lays out the important theology*
- *verses 12-21 - James speaks. He confirms what Peter says, gives final approval.*

### **Verses 6-11 - Peter Speaks**

- **vs 6-8**
  - “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter” And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days **God made a choice** among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, **bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit** just as he did to us...”
- **major point 1 - God saved & gave his Spirit to the Gentiles**
  - sure we’re debating what is right here - but we have to recognize: this is God’s doing.
    - we’re merely recognizing what God decided to do
  - **this is such a helpful way to think about life decisions**
    - there’s always pros and cons

- you can go on and debate - should I do this, or should I do this

- **listen to Peter's Wisdom - is God in it?**

- what is God doing?
- where can we clearly see God already moving?

- **should I date or marry this person?**

- is God in it?

- **should I move to this city?**

- is God in it?
- or am I just doing what I want to do?

- **should I move jobs?**

- is God in it?
- or am I just frustrated because of a difficult situation?

- **should Gentiles be circumcised?**

- Peter is pointing out
  - God saved them before they were circumcised
  - God poured out his Spirit upon them before they were circumcised
    - it would seem - that the Spirit is saying - you were saved because of God - not because of something you have done
    - Later, Paul would write a similar argument in Galatians when he said:
      - "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Galatians 3:2-4

*\*then he goes on to make 2 more significant points in verse 9:*

- **vs 9**
  - "and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith"

- **major point 2 - God made no distinction between Jew & Gentile**

- here he isn't saying there is no such thing as Jew or Gentile
  - he is saying - in terms of salvation - in terms of justification - in terms of receiving the Holy Spirit - God does not make a distinction
  - when God looks at humanity - he doesn't decide to save someone and give them his Holy Spirit based on their race or nationality
  - this is what Paul means when he says in **Galatians 3:28**
  - **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"**
  - really important side note here: this verse is often used to argue there is no such thing as male or female anymore because of Jesus. That is a mis-interpretation. God created male and female in creation - before any sin - and said it was "very good". Paul's point here - is that God doesn't make a distinction between who he will save based upon one's race, gender, or social status.

- **it's easy to miss how incredibly profound and radical this is**

- when you examine the major religions of the world, specifically geographically - you will see that every world religion besides Christianity is localized to specific regions and cultures
  - Buddhism - primarily East/South East Asia
  - Islam - primarily Middle East, South East Asia
  - Hinduism - primarily South Asia
  - Christianity - NA, SA, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia
  - **point: Jesus is for every culture and people. And he is the only truly cross-cultural savior.**
  - **we can grow here - represent Carp's cultures better**

*\*the other point Peter makes in verse 9 is this*

- **major point 3 - the way to be cleansed is through faith**
- vs 9 **"and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith"**

- **in the Old Testament - there was a huge emphasis on being clean**

- many of the laws and regulations were to make someone ceremonially clean - able to participate in worship
- we went through the book of Leviticus as a college group a few years ago -
  - the word clean and unclean are used in this one book 221 times

- but the Jews took this concept further than God intended
  - they believed that if they obeyed these laws, they could actually clean themselves spiritually
  - they even added all kinds of extra ways to be made clean that God did not include
  - this is why the Pharisees were always upset that Jesus was breaking all their rules about being clean
- it's easy to scoff a bit at these Jews, because we are so culturally removed from them
  - but we do the same thing
  - we think that if you do spiritual practices - we can clean ourselves
    - the more I come to church, read my Bible, take communion, get prayer, share my money, tell someone about Jesus - the cleaner I feel
  - **this is not true.**
    - **it wasn't true then, and it isn't true now**
- **the only thing that makes someone clean is the blood of Jesus**
  - that's it
  - only by faith in Jesus will you be clean
  - God is too holy for you to clean yourself up
  - like a little kid - who was playing outside in the mud - who tries to wipe himself off before he comes inside so he won't get in trouble
    - just not going to be able to pull it off buddy - you aren't fooling anyone
- **it was always this way - even in the Old Testament**
  - "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by **hearing with faith** - just as **Abraham believed God**, and it was counted to him as righteousness?" Galatians 3:5-6
    - Abraham was made righteous because of his faith
    - he trusted God - and God said - that's the way to be made right - faith in me
    - point: it was always by faith
    - Point: it still is only by faith we are saved and cleansed
      - nothing makes you clean but the blood of Jesus.
      - and the way you access the blood of Jesus is by faith - belief

*\*Peter goes on in verse 10*

- **vs 10**

- “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

- **major point 3 - Israel Never Even Obeyed!**

- this is great
  - the Jews are pushing hard that the Gentiles need to keep the Old Covenant commands
  - but the Jews are the biggest group of hypocrites there are
    - have you read the Old Testament?
    - ain't nobody obeying anything in this whole book!
- well, not asking them to obey all of it, just some of it - circumcision
  - Paul brings up this issue again in Galatians 3
    - “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’” Galatians 3:10
      - if you want to live by the law - then you have to obey all of it perfectly
      - you can't just pick and chose your religion - if you want to rely on circumcision, you have to rely on the whole thing
      - and if you do that - we're all doomed - for no one can pull that off

*\*which leads us to his last point in verse 11*

- **vs 11**

- “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”

- **major point 4 - we are saved by Grace**

- **The Old Testament, and the Old Covenant was never about earning your way to God**
  - its was always about grace
  - that's what all those sacrifices were always about

- they were pointers to our failure, and our need for a substitute to take our sins, for us to be forgiven
- and this is what Jesus came to do - to fulfill the Law, to fulfill all of its signs and symbols
- and yet, the Jews here are missing this Big Picture - that its all about grace
  - they turned what was a gift - God's Word and Law - into religion
    - obey the rules - then you'll be forgiven
    - they didn't see that the rules/the Law - was a pointer to grace

## The Gospel Confronts OUR Religion.

- human hearts haven't changed - and we are prone to think the same thing - even as Christians
  - legalism is the default mode of our hearts
  - "I'm doing a good job, so I'm right with God"
  - "I'm doing a bad job, so I'm not right with God"
  - **the gospel says - no one is good, the only way to be right with God is through grace**
- **legalism has a really small view of what Jesus did on the cross**
  - it's easy to think Jesus got the job started, and we gotta finish it
  - what we often overlook is that Jesus doesn't just forgive our sins - **he fulfills the Law**
    - **part of salvation - is gaining the righteousness of Christ - he fulfilled the law for you**
    - **part of salvation - is freedom from the weight of the law - that we could never obey**
- **one of the age - old concerns - is if you emphasize grace, people won't obey God!**
  - people will abuse their freedom!
  - people will go get drunk! will go sleep around!
- **a misunderstanding of the grace of God**
  - one who understands the grace is changed
  - new love, new desires, new heart, new creation, filled with the Spirit

- obey because they LOVE GOD, not because they need to save themselves through obedience
  - **a better motivation for obedience is love, not law**

*\*we ok? you with me?*

*\*now we come to the second half of the council - where the brother of Jesus speaks*

*\*he simply agrees with Peter - and gives his stamp of approval*

## **Verses 12-21 - James Speaks**

- “And all these assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Pau as they related what signs wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.’ Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues”

- **notice - James confirms by adding Biblical support to what Peter had said**
  - he quotes the prophet Amos - one of many Old Testament passages that mentions God’s inclusion of the Gentiles into his plan of salvation
  - the Jews got off track because they had forgotten the greater purposes of God
    - God chose the Jews as his instrument to bless and save the whole world

*\*the gospel not only confronts our legalism...*

## **The Gospel Confronts Our Exclusivity.**

- The Jews took their chosen-ness and used it as a means to exclude, not include
  - **they thought they were chosen because they were better, they were chosen because there was something inherently better about them**
    - the very opposite!
    - God chose them because they were least!

- **still does! choses sinners - the weak - as a point!**
  - the point is - look at this God who graciously saves!
  - not - look at these great people who are better than everyone else
- **let's be honest**
  - different cultures can make us uncomfortable
    - sometimes they seem not only different - but wrong
    - and we are ok with other cultures - as long as they become like us
    - worship like us
    - etc
- **Peter Did the Same Thing! in Galatians 2:11-14**
  - “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”
  - **though we may get the theology right - yes - Jesus came for all people, it's by grace, we may be led astray in how we live, in our attitudes**
    - Peter, feared rejection, approval of man, mistreated Gentiles

*\*now - the council makes a decision, and writes it in a letter to be sent back to Antioch, and to all the Gentile churches*

## **Verse 22-35 The Letter**

- **verse 22-23**
  - “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called

Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings'

**\*this chapter is important not only because it clarifies the gospel - but it also gives us an important model for decisions**

- **this chapter has been used throughout Church history for very important matters**
  - get the leaders together
  - look to Scripture
  - seek the wisdom of the Spirit
- **Church History: Councils**
  - who formally recognized what was Scripture
    - these are clearly from God - let's make this official
  - formally recognized key heresies, and key doctrines - such as the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the Trinity, etc

*\*now lets read the content of the letter together:*

### • **verse 24-29 - The Content of the Letter**

- "Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell"

## **The Gospel Teaches us to Be Considerate of Others.**

- **no food sacrificed to idols/strangled & blood/sexual immorality**
- "...from reverence to the blood of the sacrifices, which being then still offered, it **would needlessly grieve the Jewish converts**, and further prejudice the unconverted Jews. But as the reason has long ceased, we are left free in this, as in the like matters. **Let converts be warned to avoid all appearances of the evils which they formerly practiced, or are likely to be tempted to**; and caution them to use Christian liberty with moderation and prudence" -Matthew Henry

- **freedom to LOVE one another**
- **not flaunt our freedom**
- **The Gospel Confronts Our Western Individualism**
  - **on a practical local level today - we are Western Americans**
    - we've been trained to think of ourselves as individuals
      - in fact, we learn that the individual self is the highest authority there is
      - personal autonomy is the one thing that must not be thwarted
  - this is why submitting to God is such a challenge
    - additionally, submitting to people, to authority is so challenging
      - yet here we see the beautiful gift of church authority
- **the gospel frees us to be in authentic community**
  - not ethnic based
  - not religion based
  - based on the blood of Jesus
  - community groups
  - accountable relationships
    - gospel says you're free to be real

## • **verse 30-35**

- "So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also"

## **The Gospel brings us great joy.**

- it is a great source of encouragement and strength
  - not encouraged because of how good a job YOU did - but Jesus

- not strength in one's self, but in what Jesus has done for you